



Why Popular Economic Worries Fail to Spur Political Action

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Americans face no shortage of threats to their economic well-being. People worry about losing jobs and having a hard time finding new ones with similar wages and benefits. They worry about paying for health care, especially having to cover rising out-of-pocket costs. Money for retirement is similarly on many people's minds, given threats to employer pensions and constant talk of cut backs in Social Security and Medicare. And of course the cost of college has skyrocketed, putting young people's futures at risk. To varying degrees, these worries affect American workers and families throughout the middle and lower reaches of the income distribution. What is more, nationwide surveys regularly find that majorities of Americans place a political priority on finding solutions to these challenges.

But political action does not usually follow from widespread popular worries about rising insecurities in the U.S. economy -- except among senior citizens. In recent times, non-elderly Americans have not mounted large-scale political pressures to demand that government respond to growing insecurities. This isn't because politicians and advocates have failed to try to mobilize citizen engagement -- witness the debates over national health reform and the prominent discussion of student loans and indebtedness. In each of these cases, politicians and advocacy organizations found that it was difficult to get non-elderly Americans people involved even if they said they cared about the problem and were personally affected by it. Ironically, getting people involved proved less difficult if they cared about the issue but were *not* personally affected. This is a puzzling pattern, and my new book proposes a fresh analysis to explain why it is so difficult to mobilize people around economic insecurity issues *especially if they are personally affected*. Political rhetoric, I have discovered, can be self-defeating.

A New Way of Thinking about Barriers to Mobilizing People on Insecurity Issues

When people who experience and worry about a particular kind of economic insecurity remain disengaged, it is not simply because they lack resources. In many cases, people who experience particular economic insecurities are far from poor. Instead, the problem is that trying to mobilize people around economic worries usually entails reminding them about financial constraints that they currently face or could in the near future. This very reminder reduces their willingness to spend money on politics and, if they are in the labor force, undercuts their willingness to volunteer time to address the issue. In short, mobilization efforts tend to involve **self-undermining rhetoric** -- that is, ways of addressing people that bring to mind considerations that undermine their willingness to contribute money or time.

My research pinpoints a barrier to collective political action embodied in modes of communication -- in the unintentionally undermining messages used by organizations and elites that try to organize grassroots pressure related to personally felt economic insecurities.

Using Experiments to Observe the Effects of Self-Undermining Rhetoric

From 2008 to 2012, I conducted experiments to explore the impact of different kinds of appeals. Randomly assigned participants heard solicitations that mentioned – or did not mention – issues of economic insecurity. In “donation experiments,” people were then asked whether they wanted to give money to a political organization working on that issue. In “volunteer experiments,” participants were asked if they would be willing to volunteer time. Fascinating findings emerged:

- People personally facing economic insecurities mentioned in solicitations were 24-45% *less* likely to become donors and gave 20-58% *less* money on average. By contrast, when solicitations mentioned issues unrelated to economic insecurities, their donations did not decrease (and in some cases increased).
- When people did not personally face economic insecurities mentioned in solicitations – that is, when they were not reminded of a personal financial constraint – they were 23% *more* likely to become donors and donated 48% *more* money on average.
- People in the labor force affected by economic worries were 67% *less* likely to sign up to volunteer time when messages reminded them of the financial problems they face.
- However, personally affected people not in the labor force – mostly students and retirees – were up to 500% *more* likely to sign up to volunteer time to tackle an economic issue.
- Respondents who had no personal experiences with mentioned economic insecurity issues did not vary in their willingness to volunteer by labor force participation.

Implications for Political Campaigns

Beyond the experiments, I also analyzed surveys from presidential campaigns between 1980 and 2008 to probe the behavior of people who said various kinds of issues were the most important political problem at hand. People who considered economic insecurities important were less willing to give money, and were also less willing to donate time if they were in the labor force. My results held even when I looked at the content of the campaigns and took into account differences among respondents in objective resources like income and education.

History certainly records episodes of mass engagement on issues of economic insecurity. But my research highlights the ways in which insecurity appeals have backfired and undercut themselves in recent U.S. campaigns – particularly when leaders or groups try to inspire action by reminding people of difficulties they personally face. Appeals featuring economic worries are more likely to work with citizens who care but are *not* weighed down by those financial worries, and such appeals make more headway with people outside of the daily labor force. Retired senior citizens have responded, but millions of other Americans grappling with insecurities must be inspired to act in other ways. They cannot be expected to leap into political action simply when reminded of their personal economic troubles.

Read more in Adam Seth Levine, *American Insecurity: Why Our Economic Fears Lead to Political Inaction* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

February 1, 2015

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